

Cupcakes for EVERYBODY!!

By Karen Green

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It's now exactly four weeks since the panel I moderated at New York Comic-Con, "Graphic Novels and Academic Acceptance." There's probably not much I can add to describe it that hasn't been covered in Paul DeBenedetto's terrific and incredibly thorough [summary](#). So, I'll try to pull out a few points that were made in the course of the evening and take them out for a spin.

Who was there?

I had hoped to have a panel that was balanced between academics and creators and, for the creators, I wanted a balance between superhero and independent comics work. I also wanted creators whose work I admired as well as who had names that would pull in a crowd. The panel went through a lot of permutations but, in the end, in the corner for the academics, [Kent Worcester](#) of Marymount Manhattan College, co-editor of *A Comics Studies Reader* and *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*; [Bill Savage](#), a senior lecturer in the English department at Northwestern University; Gene Kannenberg jr, director of [ComicsResearch.org](#), editor of *500 Essential Graphic Novels: The Ultimate Guide*, and co-editor of *Erotic Comics*, vols. 1 and 2; and Greg Urquhart, Comics Editor at Alexander Street Press, and editor in charge of their forthcoming online collection, [Underground and Independent Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels](#). And in the corner for the creators, [Dean Haspiel](#), [Peter Kuper](#), and [Jonathan Hickman](#). Do I really need to tell you who those guys are? Surely not!

I had been very nervous about how many people would come. I mean, how many people come to Comic-Con to learn about academia? Then, at the 11th hour, the Con administration changed the time of my panel to Friday evening, which seemed like a death knell. Wouldn't people be too tired and hungry to attend? I voiced my worries on Twitter, and Charles Brownstein of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund suggested I announce that there would be cupcakes. So I did. On Facebook, on Twitter, in last month's column: cupcakes, *cupcakes*, CUPCAKES. And I brought 4 dozen [miniature cupcakes](#), figuring that if we got fewer attendees than we had panelists, at least we'd all get the chance to chow down.

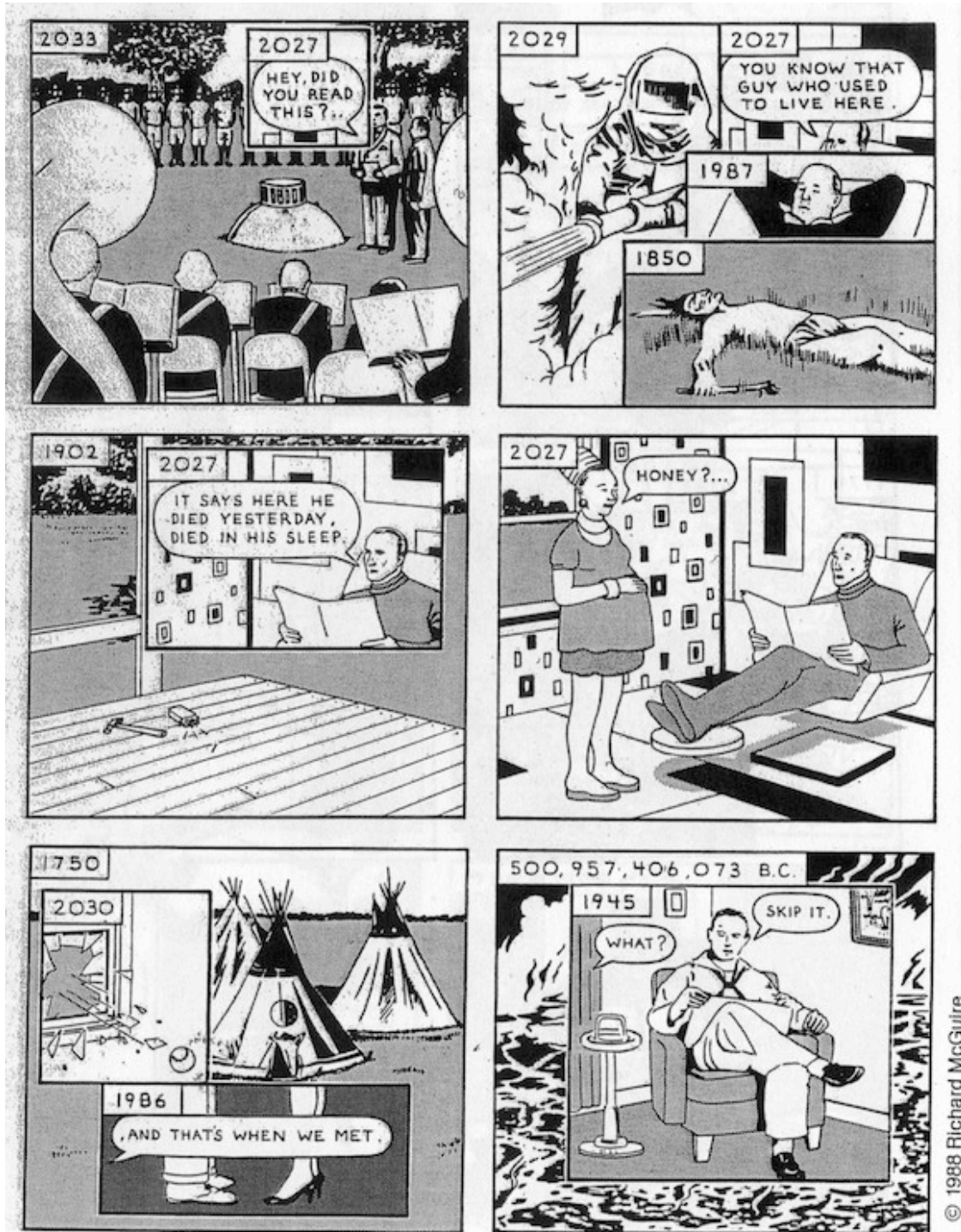
Well, I don't know if it was the panelists, the topic, or the cupcakes, or a magical combination of the three, but we had a monster turnout: probably 60 to 70 people. Gratifying? Boy HOWDY.

So what did we talk about?

Teaching comics

As was observed by panelists and audience members alike, there were really two threads running parallel during the discussion. Savage compared "the conversation about teaching comics as [one would teach] creative writing versus the conversation about the academic acceptance of comic books as a subject to be taught and studied." An audience member noted that "it's either comics as a subject, comics as literature, or comics as we're teaching

the art of the form and structure." To a certain extent, these conversations were divided by scholars and practitioners, theory vs practice. The scholars tend to teach either content (e.g., *100 Bullets* in a Crime Fiction class) or "visual literacy" (e.g. how to read comics, which helps when faced with the formalism of Richard McGuire's "Here," the final panel of which is below);



and the creators teach—well, they don't teach "how-to." They teach story-telling. Each of the creators on the panel returned to this notion, that it's not just about how to draw a comic: "Style's at the very bottom; story first, and I don't care if they come in with stick figures, if they can have a good story to tell," Kuper said. Haspiel returned to this notion: "I think if you are going to teach, if cartoonists are going to teach classes or how to make comics, story-telling is the key...I mean, obviously you should know how to draw and write, but really it's just down to how do you show a story. I always say that I *show* stories in my art and yet, you know, text can support what's happening, or allude to something that's not being shown and vice versa, but it really just comes down to the pacing and showing how that functions." And Hickman noted that "my goal is always the marriage of graphic design and narrative."

So, the creators teach how to tell a story and the scholars teach how to read the story that's told. In their scholarship, they work towards developing a critical vocabulary that their students can use to interpret, to describe, to understand the nature of visual narrative. Worcester introduced a term, for example, that he calls his contribution to comics theory: "encapsulation," which he contrasts with the notion of "simplification."

Many aspiring comics scholars make the mistake of thinking comics artists simplify action or concepts in their work; Worcester would argue that they encapsulate, and this allows the reader to unpack that visual. An example of this, perhaps, can be seen in a segment of [this interview with Seth Kushner and Dean Haspiel](#), shown last week on Brooklyn public access television: at minute 5:46, the two look at a panel from *The Alcoholic*, which presents in a single image the physical toll that his drinking has taken on protagonist Jonathan A. This is in no way a simplified image. It is complex and, potentially, it carries the weight of paragraphs worth of prose.

All of which leads to....

Why to teach

In many ways, the point of a humanities education is to learn *how* to read well. How to read texts; how to read art; how to read music. In the 20th century, the discipline of [semiotics](#) evolved as a way to understand how to read the signs in our environment, the cultural phenomena all around us. (*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines semiotics as "the systematic study of signs, or, more precisely, of the production of meanings from sign-systems, linguistic or non-linguistic," which is as good a definition of the mechanism of reading comics as any, I reckon.)

So, learning how to read comics, which are increasingly prevalent in our society, is simply another avenue for the literate humanist. Will university faculty recognize this? Perhaps, given time and exposure. Kannenberg recounted how, when he wanted to defend his dissertation proposal, he brought in a stack of comics to show the assembled professors. As the academics passed them around, he saw light dawning: "I don't know...how...oh, wait, it can be confusing!" And this, they recognized, made it their job to explain it. (Conversely, as one panelist—left anonymous here for his own protection—noted, "If it looks simple, and you can *make* it complicated, you get tenure.")

I like it, but is it art?

And what of those who resist teaching comics? Who regard it as a degraded medium? Perhaps they need to take the long historical view. Savage reminded us that novels were not always considered suitable texts for scholarly examination, either; nor was English literature as a whole. It wasn't until the 18th century that scholars began to produce critical editions of authors like Shakespeare and Milton. It was the immense popularity of early English novels

like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Richardson's *Pamela* that led to reviews in literary journals and then, by the mid-18th century, to acceptance first in universities in Scotland and from there across the British Isles. Hmm. Immense popularity, reviews in literary journals...does that sound familiar? We may just be one final step away from full academic embrace!

So, is it a degraded medium? Does it matter? In 1877, the great art critic John Ruskin said of James Whistler's evocative *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, "I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." (Whistler sued for libel, and won in court, but was awarded a mere farthing in damages. The court costs bankrupted him.) In 1913, Igor Stravinsky premiered his modernist work, *The Rite of Spring*, and audiences rioted in protest. Less than thirty years later, the music was so well accepted that Disney used it in *Fantasia* to score the segment on the evolution of the earth from Big Bang through the death of the dinosaurs.

In 1920s Weimar Germany, art took on topics such as whorehouses and the walking wounded from the Great War.





When the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibition of Weimar portraiture, "[Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s](#)," they actually had a parental advisory warning at the gallery entrance. Graphic—some would say hideous—depictions of disease-ridden prostitutes, freaks, and the horrific physical toll of the War to the End All Wars stared down from the walls. Is it art? Does it matter?

Kuper told us this story: "The toughest crowd I ever had to convince that comics could be, you know, not just for kids, but for adults and all that: the [Comic Book Legal Defense Fund](#) asked me to go down to Florida on an obscenity trial to defend a cartoonist, [Mike Diana](#), and they sent me some of his work, but not all of it, and not the piece in question, and they sent me this work, and I was *horrified*. But while I was flipping through his work, I got a phone call from the prosecution, who started to, you know, depose me, and they were basically saying this isn't art, you can't call this art, and I found myself defending it."



Is it art? Does it matter?

What do we teach—or, canon fodder

So, if you want to teach comics, but you just want to teach the "classics," what do you choose? What is the canon—and is a canon even a useful thing? The [western canon](#) has been pretty well exploded by now, taught at fewer schools than you can count on the fingers of one hand (Columbia being one of them). I asked the panel about this, and Savage started out with a useful definition: "a canon [is] those books that, if you call yourself educated, you either have read, feel guilty about not having read, or can fake having read."

This reminded me of a scene from David Lodge's superb 1975 academic satire, [Changing Places](#). In it, a mild British academic on exchange at Euphoria State University in Plotinus, California (read: Berkeley), shares with his American colleagues a game he invented as a grad student, called "Humiliation." Every player names a canonical book that he's never read, and gets a point for every other player who has read it. At the dinner party where the game is introduced, a particularly competitive junior professor blurts out "Hamlet!" when it comes to his turn. He wins, handily. Three days later, however, this junior professor fails his tenure review—the unspoken reason being that no self-respecting English Department could or would grant tenure to someone who insisted he'd never read *Hamlet*.

So what are the comics titles, the comics creators, that are a mark of shame not to have read? As all the panelists noted, that's a matter for dialogue, for argument, for debate. [Let someone propose one list](#), another will tear it down, and suggest a new one. Courses will evolve, articles and monographs will be written. One day, someone's tenure may depend on their having read *Watchmen*, or *Sandman*, or *A Contract with God*.

In the meantime, we'll keep talking. And, I'll tell you, you couldn't ask for a better bunch to start with than the seven guys who were on this panel. When you see them....buy 'em a cupcake.

Image credits:

Richard McGuire, "Here," *RAW*, 1988

Otto Dix, *The Salon I*, 1921

Otto Dix, *Skat Players*, 1920

Otto Dix, *In Memory of the Glorious Time*, 1923

Mike Diana, *Boiled Angel* #4, 1989 (p. 36)

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